



Leadership and Decontaminating a Toxic Team

By Keith H. Ferguson

Everyone has heard of Toxic Leadership. We all know its negative repercussions. But I have been a member of a Toxic Team and that too, is just as damaging. Toxic Teams are just as destructive if not more so, because they have a tendency to spread like a virus and can impact a much greater segment of organizational morale than an individual leader. The good news is that Toxic Teams can be fixed when leadership uses skill and wisdom to detoxify and neutralize the effects of individual members.

I was hired as a team member in an Army educational environment. It was a small staff consisting of 6 team members and a team lead. I worked on that team for 3.5 years. Although I started with high hopes and excitement to serve, I was so demoralized by the end of my time there that I was willing to leave a Department of Army position at any cost. I would like to point a finger and say that it was a toxic leader that poisoned the team but that would not be entirely fair.

What is a Toxic Team?

A toxic team is a group of people that work together to counter the direction or goals that leadership or an organization desires. A toxic team is not necessarily a conspiracy to undermine and may not even be aware that they are working together to counter leadership.

Often a toxic team may strongly identify with and accept the organizational goals and direction. They are proud to belong to the organization and proud of the team in which they participate. For various reasons, though, they consistently counter the direction that leadership (various levels) directs them. It is ironic that while they support organizational goals and still attempt to benefit that organization they are subversive in their approach to the various levels of leadership. Toxic teams have their own agenda and purposely sabotage some of the short term goals of leadership. The sabotage is intentional but it may not be formally planned or stated. Although they are not necessarily conspiring together to subvert goals, the lack of a formal conspiracy does not lessen the teamwork involved in subverting the will of leadership.



There are several factors that can contribute to team toxicity. The factors listed are not an exhaustive list but are observations of teams and team dynamics within industry and the Army. A key characteristic of all toxic teams is extreme team camaraderie and team identification. Within a Toxic Team, team members show a greater loyalty to each other than loyalty to the organization.

The most significant causation factor is a lack of trust in leadership's motives. A team must trust that leadership has their best interests in mind, if they do not they will likely band together in a negative way. They bond together to protect each other from "unreasonable" leadership. Team members do not necessarily have to like each other as they bond over a perception of "bad" leadership.

One result of the lack of trust is a feeling of powerlessness or impotency. This powerlessness causes them to look to themselves collectively and self-protect. It creates a dynamic of "us" against "them" and reinforces group camaraderie and team loyalty.

Another factor is an identification of gross inequity or one set of rules for some people and a completely different set of rules for others. This can create significant resentment toward leadership. As team members find repeated examples of persistent unfairness, they are repeated and replayed often as team members remind each other how badly they are treated. Many recitations of the unjust treatment cement the "us" against "them" narrative.

A third significant factor is the perception of lack of support. A team member tends to feel it is better and protective to be part of a group (that isn't supported) rather than suffering as an individual (that isn't supported).

The last significant factor is team identification of a common enemy. The team of which I was a part recognized a common enemy, although we had different reasons for considering leadership as the enemy. Although negativity towards leadership was a consistent characteristic of our group, we were able to be productive as well. We made sure that the organizational goals were met but never as a result of what our team lead did. We held ad hoc meetings to strategize how we could serve the organization and often accomplished more in those ad hoc meetings than our regular staff meetings. However, some of our productivity dissipated because of poor attitudes.



The Consequences

Toxic teams are costly. Negativity decreases personal productivity as well as department or organizational productivity. Morale is diminished. Negative morale is contagious and has a huge impact in a field or office environment. Negative morale can lead to quality people leaving because of a negative climate.

Toxins that lead to Team Toxicity

Kyle Newman, founder and CEO of Beyond the Leading Edge, a company which focuses on “human capital development” has identified specific toxins that must be addressed by leadership if they are to change climate within a team.

The first toxin is persistent negative or destructive criticism. Constructive criticism is fine. It honestly points out shortfalls but with an eye toward correction. Destructive criticism happens when leadership constantly criticizes or berates members without ever providing positive feedback of what a team is doing right or guidance on how to change. When criticism feels like an attack on a person’s character or work ethic it is especially destructive. Team members feel as if no one on the team ever does a single thing right.¹

Newman’s second toxin is persistent defensiveness.² Leadership’s inability to accept constructive criticism from below, even in the smallest doses assists in creating a team’s lack of trust in leadership. The perceived inability of the leader to accept any responsibility for departmental failures and instead always pointing the finger of blame to an individual or individuals will undermine their own authority. Blaming is often associated with persistent defensiveness.

Change is Possible

Changing a negative climate caused by toxic teams is hard work. Proactive leadership taking steps to eliminate the toxins that contributed to the problem, whether they be team toxins or leadership toxins can improve morale and productivity.

My experience has taught me that there are several rules that can be followed to be proactive in solving the problem rather than letting it fester.

Rule 1: When teams exhibit toxicity—look for toxic leadership.



Rule 2: Fix the toxicity in the leader and the toxins that exist in the team will eventually flush out.

Rule 3: Toxic Teams are not able to fix themselves. Once a team has become toxic it is necessary to decontaminate them.

If a toxic team is identified there are steps that can be taken toward solving the problem.

Step 2: Leaders must set clear expectations and define specific behavior types that are acceptable and unacceptable.³

Step 2: Focus on accountability rather than blame. Fixing blame, especially on teams or individuals, can backfire and generate additional bad behavior. Redirect the team to organizational goals and needs.

Step 3: Make team members feel valued and recognize their importance. When this happens, the team can re-engage in useful dialogue and productivity. More so than many organizations, the Army can force compliance to goals and methods of achieving those goals but bullying team members into acceptance of new priorities will not solve any problems. Progress happens when leadership demonstrates respect for the talents of team members.

Step 4: Communicate both the positive and negative in an honest way. Communication must function in two directions, both top-down and from bottom to top. If there is not two way communication toxicity percolates.

Step 5: Create a shared vision or mission. It is the job of leadership to create a vision with team members of the directions that must be taken to accomplish the mission. Team members must buy-in to that vision. This buy-in is not achieved in the cognitive domain but in the affective domain. Individuals must feel the buy-in, not just engage in an intellectual exercise on the cognitive domain.

If team members can't be incorporated into the vision, functioning with them may be impossible. If that is the case, some members of the team must be dismissed or they can re-infect a team with negativity. If they don't share the vision they can't be part of it. If a leader can't create a coherent common vision it might be a time for new leadership.



The Social Contract

Cleaning a toxic environment is a leadership task, not a team task. It means flushing out all of the toxins, in team members and from leadership itself.

All humans are subject to idiosyncrasies and foibles. It is part of the human condition. However, everyone must commit to a mutual contract of respect for one another despite the imperfections people exhibit. They must agree to serve each other for the common good.

It is not necessary they agree on all things but they must recognize the mutuality and commonality they share. A clear social contract spells out what acceptable behavior is and what behaviors will not be tolerated. Good contracts imply equality of membership so that leaders and subjects are subject to the exact same guidelines, rights, and privileges. If those rights are not rigidly enforced or are subject to shifting “goal lines” individuals will cease to honor all other parts of the contract and negativity; poor morale and unproductivity will prevail.

The Results of my Experience

The team of which I was a part no longer exists. Half of its members moved to other locations because problems were left undressed. I left and moved to a new job in a different state. It is tragic that half of the members felt the only option was to leave. The dissolution of the team, although ultimately good for the organization could have been handled differently and both team members and the organization could have grown and benefitted. Those that chose to stay have been incorporated into a new team and are productive. In my new organization I have continued to serve on teams, some that worked well and others, not so much. However through soul searching, I have come to recognize I was part of the problem in my previous organization. My toxic dysfunction hurt the organization. Toxic Teams harm a work place but they can be fixed. Effective leadership recognizes problems as they start and can make change to prevent this serious challenge.

1. Kyle Newman, “The Four Team Toxins,” post on Beyond the Leading Edge, September 23, 2015, <http://www.beyondtheleadingedge.com/news/teams/the-four-team-toxins/>



2. Ibid.
3. Christine M. Riordian, "Why Teams Turn Toxic, and How to Heal Them," *Forbes.com*, September 20, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2011/09/20/why-teams-turn-toxic-and-how-to-heal-the-m/>